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December 19, 2022

Secretary Josh Saal
State of Rhode Island
Department of Housing
315 Iron Horse Way
Providence, RI 02908

Dear Secretary Saal,

Thank you for your recent communications and your Department's ongoing partnership with our organization. It goes without saying that we share your firm commitment to supporting Rhode Islanders who are experiencing homelessness and housing insecurity.

In response to your letter dated December 15, 2022 and our previous meetings, I would like to share the following information and outline proposed next steps for improved collaboration between the Department and the Coalition. As always, please do not hesitate to reach out to me to discuss any of these matters further.

As the State leads for the Homeless Management Information System ("HMIS") and the Coordinated Entry System ("CES"), the Coalition shares your appreciation for data and how it can be used to help end homelessness in Rhode Island. We strive to continuously improve and refine our use of data to better serve the most vulnerable Rhode Islanders.

The Coalition stands behind the accuracy and reliability of the data contained in the HMIS database. HMIS metadata reveals when/how the data were collected and entered. HMIS securely maintains the names and other key information (e.g., demographics, contact numbers, etc.) of Rhode Islanders experiencing homelessness. Moreover, CES records every call into the Help Center, providing further data verification. HMIS data is deduplicated and there are numerous data quality activities to ensure it is reliable.

Typically, when the Coalition submits aggregate reports to the Department of Housing and Urban Development (e.g., annual Congressional report), it is returned to us with few or no errors. If you have any questions or concerns about the manner in which the Coalition gathers and utilizes data, you and your staff are welcome to explore applying for HMIS access privileges.

As you are aware, the State of Rhode Island has seen a dramatic increase in homelessness—particularly unsheltered homelessness—since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the spring of 2020, Rhode Island has weathered a sharp economic downturn, rising housing and utility costs, and historic year-over-year inflation in the cost of food, clothing, and other basic necessities of life. These adverse impacts have placed an incredible strain on Rhode Islanders living on the margins.

The Coalition and other stakeholders consistently have raised these concerns, along with proposed solutions, via letters and draft crisis plans over the summer and fall of 2022.

We called on the Governor and the Department of Housing to immediately:

1. Deploy \$15 million dollars worth of resources to bring 380 shelter beds online and ensure adequate Housing Problem Solving resources.
2. Declare Homelessness in Rhode Island as a State of Emergency (as other communities have),
3. Reenact Interagency Council on Homelessness, tasked with developing a State Plan to Address Homelessness,

We greatly appreciate the additional resources that are now being brought into the system by the State. However, there is much more that needs to be done to protect our most at-risk Rhode Islanders.

Relative to your request for real-time data sharing, our team can coordinate with your office and the Continuum of Care (“CoC”) on next steps to better share information. As we have discussed with the Department in the summer of 2022, we have drafted online “live” data dashboards to share real time information. We would love to work with your team to bring this project over the finish line. If there are additional requests for reports or other visualizations, we encourage you to reach out to our staff or send an email to HMIS@rihomeless.org.

As we have reaffirmed repeatedly, the Coalition does not possess the exact location or geolocation coordinates of homeless encampments in Rhode Island. On each occasion you have requested this information, we have stated that the Coalition does not have this information in its possession, custody, or control. We have provided approximate locations by region and redirected the State to street outreach providers who can best provide the requested information.

The oft-cited reference to eighty encampments is an estimate based on coordination with street outreach providers in the fall of 2022. Street outreach workers shared the approximate locations of known encampments for the purpose of creating an aggregate “heat” map of homelessness in our State. The Coalition shared this “heat map” with the Department shortly after its creation. Information on encampments is not a HUD required data element and is not something that is tracked in HMIS. Once again, please reach out to the various street outreach providers in the State for more precise location data.

In regards to your previously stated request to have encampment information tracked in HMIS, the Coalition can work with your office, street outreach providers, and the CoC on this matter. However, it would not be without reservations. Many have expressed concern that sharing or tracking encampment location information in HMIS will result in unintended harm to the persons residing outdoors (e.g., residents may be evicted with no place to go, targeted, or shared publicly through a Freedom of Information Act request).

In response to your request for the CES “waiting list” as of December 14, 2022 of those who are waiting for a shelter bed, the Coalition provided a full deidentified export of the CES Shelter Queue (from HMIS) to you on Friday, December 15, 2022. The shelter queue for December 14th was not possible due to the live, dynamic prioritization within the database, so the real time data was exported for Friday.

With regard to CES, I would like to again express our deepest desire to work collaboratively with your Department and Governor McKee to resolve our current housing crisis. We also do not want Rhode Islanders living outside, particularly in this cold weather. However, we cannot, because of federal law and regulations, and social justice reasons, allow persons residing at a specific encampment to “cut the line” in front of other unsheltered Rhode Islanders who are of higher acuity. This prioritization process, mandated by law, is intended to ensure those who are most likely to die outdoors are prioritized first for any available resource or shelter bed.

The best way to support residents of any encampment (even the recently dismantled State House encampment) is to work together to bring additional resources online for all unsheltered Rhode Islanders (e.g., additional shelter beds, financial assistance, legal assistance, housing problem solving, rental assistance, etc.) We applaud your department and the Governor for opening the new warming station at the Cranston Street Armory and will help in whatever way we can to bring similar resources online until no one is left outdoors.

Our hope is that we can work together to do what we can this winter and immediately begin planning for next winter so we do not end up in this same place again next year.

Thank you for your partnership.

Warmly,



Caitlin Frumerie, Executive Director
Rhode Island Coalition to End Homelessness

CC:

Emily Freedman, Acting Chair, Rhode Island Continuum of Care
Elizabeth Bioteau, Planner, Rhode Island Continuum of Care
Eric Hirsh, Chair, Rhode Island Continuum of Care, HMIS Steering Committee